

When Class Matters (When Classroom Learning Matters)

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September 9, 2013 - by Stephen Paskoff

Just as technology has changed how we read newspapers, listen to music and watch TV, movies and other content-rich events, it's also altered the academic and workplace classroom and how we deliver learning.

We've already seen an evolution, which has moved learning from in-person classrooms to online "pre-recorded" learning courses. The next phase is interactive learning that will be brought to the desktop of students who participate in a real-time interactive experience from virtually any global location.

In academia, MOOCs, or massive open online courses, are getting investment funding and prompting educators to predict how live, "traditional classroom" learning will diminish in significance. The vision is that content taught by average instructors who simply read canned notes to students will disappear, and that, in time, everyone would have access to dynamic, academic superstars. The same scenario is talked of being instituted for workplace learning environments.

While we continue to experiment with live interactive virtual learning for widely dispersed participants, I've had some thoughts about when a live class experience matters.

The following items should be considered to make classroom experiences matter.

- **The principles being taught are likely to generate conceptual resistance.** In many instances, particularly with ethics and workplace conduct issues, the information is easy to understand (don't lie, don't make racial comments or jokes). When people misbehave, it's generally not due to a lack of information; it's due to a decision to ignore or

purposely violate key standards. In a classroom via dialogue and the responses of other participants, there's a viable opportunity to attack willful denial. When the focus is on one-way information, this opportunity doesn't exist.

- **Learning involves discussions between students, as opposed to a one-way communication between the instructor and participant.** While technology does allow for discussion groups among remote participants, there's nothing like listening to another learner sitting right next to you telling you why he or she disagrees with your point of view.
- **It's important to explore nuance, e.g., where individual questions will relate to special situations that need to be analyzed and factual differences matter.** In a live class, an experienced instructor can illustrate how different situations require different results with a few back-and-forth questions.
- **The organization's commitment and credibility are part of the message.** Nothing beats having a leader look his or her audience in the eye, and convincingly say this topic and this particular principle are important and invite specific face-to-face tough questions. Pre-recorded or unidirectional learning doesn't allow that.
- **Skills involving interpersonal communication and problem solving based on how others react is involved.** It's easy to explain to someone how to communicate a difficult subject. But, often there are variable responses, when a back-and-forth exchange between the instructor and the audience is necessary; and a one-way transmission simply wouldn't work.

There are many reasons why the live classroom has survived since Socrates' time and before. One reason has been that there were no other ways to deliver live learning, a limitation that has been diminishing over the years. Another is that live learning can't be beat in certain situations.

Our job is to figure out how to harness technology and to know when live or remote learning is needed or when other less direct learning methods are best suited for particular audiences.

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